

## AGRICULTURE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

The following is the report presented to the Trustees' section of the Ontario Educational Association by the Special Committee appointed to investigate the question of teaching Agriculture in Public Schools. It was adopted at their meeting held March, 1894 :

1. The present state of the law on this subject may be gathered from the prescription of work in the Departmental Regulations respecting the "Course of Studies" in Form IV. of the Public Schools, as follows : "Plant life, composition of soils, etc. The course in authorized text-book to be followed." In the "Special Directions" to teachers, the subject of agriculture is thus dealt with : "The authorized text-book on this subject should be introduced into every rural school. Special attention should be given to such points as how plants grow, and what they feed upon ; how farms are beautified and cultivated ; the value of shade trees ; what trees to plant and when to plant them ; the relation of agriculture to other pursuits ; the effects of climate on the habits of a people."

2. Except that the teaching of agriculture should not be limited to Forms IV. and V., there does not seem to be much need for any change in the phraseology of either the above regulation or the above direction, so far as rural schools are concerned. Under them agriculture may be taught to any extent, and in any way that may seem good to the authorities of each school. If the trustees of a particular school desire to have agriculture taught, they can require the teacher to give instruction in it, and the inspector will have to see that the requirement is complied with. The subject is not optional, but obligatory in rural schools, and if it is neglected school boards have themselves to blame.

3. The chief obstacle to the more general introduction of agriculture in schools seems to be the treatment it receives at the High School entrance examination, and your Committee are strongly of opinion that a practice, different from the one which at present obtains, should be adopted with respect to it. Under existing regulations, agriculture is nominally an optional subject, but instead of being encouraged to take it, pupils who go up to the examination it are subjected to a serious disadvantage as compared with those who do not, and the consequent discouragement has practically driven the subject out of the rural schools, in a large portion of which it was taught for a time.

4. In the opinion of your Committee it is an advantage rather than otherwise that the subject is optional at the entrance examination, as the teacher is free to adopt, subject to the approval of the

inspector, the most effective method of dealing with it; but so long as it is optional, the marks obtained on the agricultural paper should be allowed as a bonus to assist the candidate in making up the percentage of the aggregate necessary to pass, and the maximum for the subject itself should be increased from seventy-five to one hundred marks.

5. It will be noticed that though the course embodied in the authorized text-book is to be followed, the use of the book itself as a text-book in the hands of the pupils is not compulsory. Without implying any disparagement of the work referred to—which is an excellent treatise on the subject, and is really indispensable alike as a source of information and as a guide to the adoption of proper methods by the teacher—it is better, in the opinion of your Committee that the law should in this respect remain as it is. Anything more likely than cramming the contents of a manual for examination purposes to create a distaste for agriculture it would be difficult to imagine. The manner of dealing with the subject in school must be determined by reference to the purpose for which it has been introduced into the programme. This purpose is two-fold: (a) to arouse the scientific curiosity of the pupils about agricultural operations, and thus make them self-reliant investigators of agricultural methods; and (b) to make agricultural pursuits more attractive, and thus check the tendency of young men and women to abandon them for others that are intrinsically less desirable. These two objects, so far from being incompatible, can best be insured by the same means, namely the adoption of a rational method of dealing with the subject in schools.

6. One cause for the growing dislike of farm life is the feeling of drudgery due to the want of an intellectual interest in the operations performed. The best way to arouse interest and thus counteract the feeling referred to is to make so-called "teaching" of agriculture an inquiry into the reasons why operations familiar to all rural pupils are systematically performed. The teacher who knows how to ask the right kind of questions can easily set his pupils thinking and inquiring, and he may in this way become a centre of influence and a source of inspiration to a whole neighborhood. One such teacher quietly pursuing his investigatory and suggestive treatment of farm life and work from week to week might accomplish more for his district than a series of farmers' institutes could do in the way of an agricultural revival; and if agriculture is ever to become a subject of deep and wide-spread scientific interest to the people of this Province, it must be by fixing upon it the attention of those who are children now, and who will be the men and women of the next generation.

7. It is frequently objected that teachers who do not know the subject cannot teach it, and there is force in the objection. It must be borne in mind, however, that there are few teachers who do not

know something about agriculture from practical experience; that all teachers have easy access to an admirably arranged and thoroughly modern manual on the subject; that the true attitude of the expert teacher is not that of a dogmatist, but that of an inquirer in this or any other subject; that if he starts questions his pupils will be able to find answers to many of them in the experience of the farmers themselves, and above all that the true function of the teacher is not to fill the minds of the pupils with facts and explanations, but to make them expert at observing facts and finding out reasons for themselves—not to supply them with a mass of second-hand information, but to equip them with a method of original investigation. This he can effectively do while he himself is a learner. The objection is likely to be further obviated by the institution at the Provincial Agricultural College of summer courses specially adapted to teachers.\* If school boards insist, as they have a right to stipulate, that the teachers they hire shall know something about agriculture, and if the Provincial Department of Agriculture furnishes them with an opportunity to acquire a knowledge of the subject, the objection cited loses much of its force.

8. It has been further urged as an obstacle to the introduction of agriculture into schools that there is no time for it in an already crowded programme of studies. The obvious answer is that if it is more important than other things for rural schools, the other things must give way, to some extent at least. The programme has been constructed for the schools, and for them it may be modified whenever change seems desirable. This objection usually takes the form that the great aim of school education is intellectual training, and that agriculture is not as well adapted as other subjects for use as an instrument of mental discipline. Each of these statements is incorrect. There are other objects quite as important as intellectual development to be effected by a school course, and agriculture is one of the very best means, especially in rural districts, of securing intellectual development. The kind of mental culture that is serviceable for life may be defined as including (a) the faculty of observing individual facts; (b) the ability to classify them according to resemblances and differences, and (c) the power of drawing correct inferences by generalization from knowledge so systematized. To pupils in rural schools the facts and phenomena of farm life and agricultural operations are, or may easily be made familiar as the result of original observation prompted by a teacher's well-directed questions. The natural tendency of the human mind to arrange facts in classes or categories, and to draw conclusions or assign causes,

\*The scheme referred to above has since been carried out, the first summer course for teachers having been given during July, 1893.

needs only to be encouraged by careful direction in order to open up wide and inviting fields of research in such sciences as chemistry, physics, biology, geology, and meteorology. Compared with the ordinary methods of acquiring book learning, which are for the most part simply appropriating systematized knowledge at second-hand, instead of systematizing it for oneself, such a study of agriculture may fairly lay claim to be an exceptionally advantageous and effective means of intellectual discipline.

9. Though the law apparently contemplates that agriculture shall be taught only in rural schools, and has not made it compulsory in any others, it is in the opinion of your Committee exceedingly desirable that it should be introduced also in cities, towns and villages. If children brought up on the farm are leaving it in alarming numbers, it may be that one remedy for the evil will be found in so dealing with agriculture as to make the pursuit appear attractive to children who have never lived on a farm, and who may be found willing or eager to take up the calling which others are abandoning. To this end something might be done by giving in school text-books more prominence to matters connected with agricultural life. This is especially true of the Readers, and it should be kept in view in any future revision of the authorized series. Pending such a revision something might be accomplished by wise direction of the pupils' voluntary and supplemental reading, by the selection of themes for composition, and by taking advantage of such agricultural occurrences as are from time to time reported in the newspapers to start interesting and instructive discussions.

All of which is respectfully submitted.

WM. HOUSTON,  
*Chairman.*

